

Dear Media: Here are some tips for covering Donald Trump and the GOP campaign

Written by The Conversation USA

The GOP candidates debate again tomorrow night.

Donald Trump reportedly won't join them. His campaign has confirmed to various news outlets that he intends to skip the debate after losing a showdown with Fox News [over Megyn Kelly's role](#) as moderator.

That doesn't mean he won't be drawing media attention with what he says and how he says it. This time, let's hope the media gets its coverage of Trump right.

By "get it right," I mean more illumination of the candidate and his policies and less simple reflection of the heat he generates.

Journalists may find themselves challenged to find the light because of Trump's politically aggressive approach and [inflammatory language](#). He famously claimed Mexico sends [rapists and criminals to the U.S.](#)

He suggested [Muslims](#) should [not be allowed](#) in the country, and that thousands of them [cheered the attack on the World Trade Center](#) on 9/11. A Muslim woman was [recently ejected](#) from a Trump rally in South Carolina.

Into the fray

Trump targets journalists, too. His [numerous disagreements](#) with Kelly started at the [first GOP debate](#) back in August. He had [Jorge Ramos of Univision thrown out](#) of a press conference, although he later let him back in. In a TV interview, he called New Hampshire Union Leader publisher Joe McQuaid a "lowlife." And he appeared to physically

mock

[Serge Kovaleski](#)

of The New York Times, who has a congenital joint disease.

Despite these attacks, it is critical in political campaigns that the public get information it can trust. How ethically journalists cover the news matters. As the Knight Chair of Media Ethics at Washington and Lee University who has taught ethics to professional journalists for a decade at the Poynter Institute, I see journalistic credibility as essential for a functioning democracy.

How can a journalist report the facts but also tell the truth?

What approach will enable the news media to convince its readers, listeners and viewers what matters is news – not views?

A question of trust

A good place to start is by critically examining the journalistic work being produced.

Trump's caustic, often unproven, provocative statements and actions are prompting a number of those in the news media to reevaluate how to describe and label what he says.

Buzzfeed editor Ben Smith acknowledges that it is [a challenge to be fair](#) and not undermine his staff's work, when it comes to covering Trump. Erik Wemple, the media critic at the Washington Post, [writes](#) that "neutral journalism" needs to be rethought when it comes to this candidate.

Smith's and Wemple's views challenge the "objective," or even impartial, approach usually expected and followed by traditional journalists. For them, the journalistic tendency of just providing the facts may not be enough.

Beyond stenography

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Defining a substantive news agenda is also important.

Plenty of news outlets will report on the horse race throughout the campaign to come.

What's needed are more stories that provide a more thorough understanding of what would happen if Trump's comments and policies became a reality.

The Washington Post did this harder kind of story when it looked at how Trump taps into the [antipathy some white Americans](#) have for immigrants. [The National Catholic Register](#), to choose another example, did a good job by examining what Trump's ban on Muslims might have on the religious freedom of other religious groups.

Look to history

History provides some lessons on dealing with an accusatory candidate.

Salon writer Daniel Denvir penned an article headlined ["Donald Trump is the second coming of George Wallace."](#) Wallace, like Trump, focused on those who feared for their safety, wrote Denvir.

In the 1950s, Senator Joseph McCarthy became famous, then infamous, for supposedly uncovering Communists in the U.S. government. In general, too many journalists failed to report on McCarthy with depth or scope. The press stuck [to "narrow definitions of 'objectivity' \(that\) provided little of no background or analysis](#), according to Edwin R. Bayley, who wrote [a book](#) about McCarthy and the press.

Trump's attacks matter, but they matter less than the news media's need to decide what coverage is required, the accuracy of Trump's messages and their impact.

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By relying on journalistic codes and [guiding principles](#) , journalists can position themselves to keep their focus off of themselves and centered on the implications and impact of Trump's pronouncements. The key is to examine the why – and not just the what – of what Trump trumpets.

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